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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOR. The New York Times and Its Times. By Harrison E. Salisbury. 620 pages. Times Books. \$17.50.

Books of The Times

By Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

DEEP in the jungle of Harrison E. Salisbury's "Without Fear or Favor" there lies an elegant thesis concerning the effect of The New York Times's publication of the Pentagon Papers on the role of the press in contemporary American society. To put that thesis in a knapsack: until the papers came its way, The Times had been part of the governing establishment, as witness the newspaper's suppression, on the advice of the German Foreign Office and President Theodore Roosevelt, of William Bayard Hale's incendiary interview with Kaiser Wilhelm II in July 1908, or the newspaper's playing down of (not suppression, as is widely thought) and failure to follow up Tad Szulc's April 1961 report on preparations for the forthcoming Bay of Pigs invasion.

But with the agonized decision to publish the Pentagon Papers, and the United States Supreme Court's upholding of its right to do so, The Times's role shifted. As the author writes, "It has quite literally become that Fourth Estate, that fourth coequal branch of government of which men like Thomas Carlyle spoke." This is Mr. Salisbury's thesis, and he probably could have developed it, with ample illustration, in under 200 pages.

Filling In Background

Yet I for one am just as glad that he has let one thing remind him of another and another; and thus buried his thesis in a history-memoir-analysis of more than 600 pages. It is true that he has paid an esthetic price for his all-inclusiveness. His book is not only overlong, but also underorganized, lapsing as it does, after the climax of Watergate, into convoluted and meandering analyses, first of The Times's coverage of the South during the civil-rights revolution, and then of the newspaper's relationship (or lack of relationship) to the Central Intelligence Agency from the time of its postwar inception.

Of course, the second half of the book serves important purposes — among them, to fill in the background of important legal decisions (in the Connor and Sullivan lawsuits against The Times) that worked to protect the press from indiscriminate libel actions, and to explore the precise degree to which Timesmen cooperated with the C.I.A. both before and after the publication of the Pentagon Papers.

But Mr. Salisbury seems never to have decided whether he was writing social history or legal analysis. For the points of what seem at first to be lengthy digressions often remain obscure. Once more, he has an annoying habit of teasing us by carefully setting up dramatic vignettes — at a Washington Gridiron Club celebration, at an Aleister Crowley sex orgy, at a Mollie Parnis dinner party ("Mollie Parnis was nervous," begins the scene. "She had invited Henry Kissinger to dinner, it was almost five and she just couldn't get Lyndon Johnson out of her dress shop.") But because he is not truly committed to an anecdotal history, these scenes tend to narrow down to tiny points (the purpose of the Parnis dinner-party scene is merely to estab-

lish that on the eve of the papers' publication, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, the publisher of The Times, was nervous), or to collapse into generalized assertions, leaving us to wonder why the author bothered to set up the scenes in the first place.

Still, despite these artistic shortcomings, "Without Fear or Favor" remains on balance very much worth reading. It reveals so much about what went on behind the scenes of the Pentagon Paper crisis that not even its narrative shortcomings can diminish its essential drama. Not least among Mr. Salisbury's new revelations is the extraordinary reaction to the publications of the papers of President Richard M. Nixon and his aides, which was not at all to be concerned with the constitutional and legal issues raised by The Times's action, or with possible threats to military security or diplomatic negotiations in progress. Instead, they focused on what Mr. Salisbury calls "the institutionalization of paranoia" that, he believes, was eventually to lead to Watergate and the destruction of Mr. Nixon's Presidency.

Much of what Mr. Salisbury reveals could be characterized as gossip — about the internal workings of The Times, the relations of its key personnel and its history — if only it weren't so highly pertinent to the development of the newspaper as an institution, and thus to the role it played in what the author characterizes as "a New American Revolution." Still, the story retains the appeal of gossip. And so, in a manner of speaking, we get to eat our cake and have it, too. We learn of the spats and squabbles and anxieties of the people who labor behind the scenes of The Times. Yet none of what Mr. Salisbury reports is without historical dimension.

What will be the eventual significance of that history? Mr. Salisbury isn't certain. He suggests repeatedly that neither the press in general nor The Times in particular has yet, in the wake of the history he recites, become sufficiently aware of its transformation into a true fourth branch of the Government. But the future is another story. The one that is told in "Without Fear or Favor" is so vast and tangled that it barely seems to fit inside of 620 pages.